

# Investigative organization has big tasks, low profile

**AGENCY** Six agents work at the North Texas office of the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, a little-known agency with big responsibilities.

By **TONI HEINZL**  
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ARLINGTON — When Red Brigades terrorists kidnapped Brig. Gen. James Dozier, in Italy in 1981, David Watson was asked to help U.S. and Italian investigators find him.

When 10 sailors were killed in an explosion on a ship in Bahrain in 1990, Watson headed there to investigate.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, Watson's Internet and computer expertise made him a natural choice to track e-mail correspondence, credit-card numbers, addresses or flight bookings of terrorist suspects.

In his 27 years as a special agent with the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, Watson has crossed the globe, with stints in Japan, Europe and the Middle East for this elite federal law enforcement agency.

He is one of about 900 civilian special agents in more than 150 locations worldwide whose wide-ranging duties revolve around protecting members of the Navy and Marine Corps and their families and investigating crimes with Navy or Marine Corps ties.

The Sept. 11 attacks prompted the agency to intensify its efforts to prevent terrorism and protect the military at home and abroad.

"I was assigned to one of the units looking at the Internet-related aspects of the investigation," Watson said about his role in the aftermath of Sept. 11. "If the suspects used the Internet, what information could we glean about them and others connected to the attacks?"

Watson and his five colleagues at the North Texas resident agency, which is in an office complex in north Arlington, work for a little-known organization shouldered with awesome responsibilities.

They work in the shadow of the FBI, the CIA and other more prominent federal agencies.

But the variety of duties makes working for the service one of the most demanding jobs in law enforcement.

The agents in the North Texas office cover an area spanning two-thirds of Texas and all of Oklahoma and Kansas.

"We have a mixture of backgrounds," Supervisory Special Agent Jody Fletcher said. "A lot of our agents are former state, local, federal or military law enforcement officers. More than 50 percent have advanced degrees."

Watson helped solve the murder of a Marine on a ship off the coast of South Korea and uncovered fraud scams run by military contractors. His



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Special agents of the Naval Criminal Investigative Service's North Texas office practice at the shooting range at Naval Air Station Fort Worth. The elite agency's duties include protecting members of the Navy and Marines.

fraud investigations helped the government recoup millions of dollars. Last December, he received the Special Agent of the Year Award for his work on fraud cases.

Investigative service agents investigate crimes ranging from murder, robbery, rape and arson to child pornography. The agency's cold-case unit, founded at its Washington headquarters in 1992, has solved decades-old slayings and has become a national model for investigating unsolved killings.

The organization's agents work with law enforcement agencies worldwide to eliminate drug dealing in areas around military installations. They protect vital military technology, investigate espionage and analyze terrorist threats.

Agents around the globe are assigned to security details protecting the secretary of the Navy, senior military commanders or visiting foreign dignitaries.

A highlight of most any agent's career is a Special Agent Afloat tour of duty aboard an aircraft carrier or with an amphibious readiness group, Fletcher said. These assignments can last six months or longer.

The special agents afloat provide security briefings before the ships go into port.

They inform the sailors and Marines about local customs and instruct them in safety precautions.

"I've seen a lot of the world through my career, places people visit on vacation, and I did my job and served my country," Fletcher said.

In January, military leaders came to Arlington to dedicate the first joint field office in the nation for subsidiary agencies of the Defense Criminal Investigative Service. Sharing a computer forensics laboratory and other investigative support services, the naval investigative service's North Texas office moved in under one roof with its military sister agencies in the Air Force and Army.

Special Agent Rick Minnich says the variety of his assignments and the frequent travel amaze less-traveled officers in other agencies he meets on his assignments.

Now specializing in investigating sexual crimes and identity theft, Minnich has worked protecting members of the Blue Angels, served on the security detail for Oliver North during the Iran-Contra affair and worked undercover stings in Sydney, Australia, to help nab drug dealers before they could approach visiting sailors.

"A good part of that work is the deterrence effect," Minnich said. "We want the drug dealers to know: Don't sell drugs to sailors or Marines, or else."

Another special agent on Fletcher's team, David Watson (no relation to the computer specialist and fraud expert),

traded his job as a police officer in Monroe, La., for a career with the investigative service. The agency sent him to Singapore, New Zealand and Australia.

His first station after completing the four-month training course for federal officers: Los Angeles.

"It was quite a culture shock," he said.

Assigned to a federal task force investigating sexual exploitation of children and child pornography on the Internet, Watson learned to pose in chat rooms as an underage teen or a parent offering encounters with his own child to pedophiles seeking to meet children.

"We arrested people traveling to L.A.," Watson said. "This was very rewarding, proactive work. You could catch the bad guys before an actual child was harmed."

Watson hopes his new assignment will again lead to catching the bad guys before they have a chance to strike.

This time the stakes are much higher. After arriving at the Dallas field office about a year ago, Watson was assigned full time to the North Texas Joint Terrorism Task Force, headed by the FBI, to help prevent another attack.

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